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The Breaking and Remaking of America’s Two Party System in the 1850s...
...as Experienced by Henry Bliss Northup

The decade that preceded the Civil War was a transformative time in American history. The Second Party System, a three decade old, cross-sectional (North-South), two party system that consisted of Whigs and Democrats dissolved under mounting societal pressures accentuated by the slavery question. With their party's collapse, many northern Whigs, who held anti-slavery sentiments but who also believed in the sanctity of the Union, were left politically homeless.

If the growing crisis over slavery was not difficult enough, the 1850s were also unique because of the mass influx of immigrants into the United States. In the decade from 1845 to 1854, immigrant arrivals counted for fourteen-and-a-half percent of the country's population—the United States has never since experienced such high levels of immigration. Nativism and anti-Catholicism ran rampant. The Know-Nothing movement was born out of the fear that immigrants, and especially Catholics, were plotting a cabal on behalf of the Holy See in Rome. Under these conditions the Know-Nothing movement took to the political stage. By the mid-1850s, their increasingly pro-Unionist American Party seemed to be the frontrunner to emerge as the main challenger to the Democrats. Avoidance of the slavery question was a key part of the American Party's platform. However, it became clear this approach to save the Union now and address the slavery problem later was not sustainable. Thus, the Republican Party ascended to establish itself as the challenger to the Democrats in a reformed two party system, building the foundation upon which our current political party system has stood for the past 160 years.

One person who exemplifies the struggles that individuals faced during these trying times is Henry Bliss Northup, a Middlebury graduate, class of 1829. He was a leader in his community, tried to take actions that he thought would lead to the best outcome for his country, supported women's rights as a New York State Assemblyman in 1856, and believed that justice should be color-blind. Despite his likely affinity for Republicans' message, he did not align with them until 1860 because he thought their rhetoric would further damage North-South unity. Northup not only provides a lens through which to view the tumultuous 1850s, his experience offers points of reflection for us today.

Sources Include:
Newberry Library (Chicago) Know-Nothing pamphlets – see bibliography.